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SIPDIS

FOR NEA/RA (YAPHE) AND NEA/MAG (PATTERSON/HAYES)

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TAGS: PREL IZ TS

SUBJECT: REGIONAL ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY FOR IRAQ: THE VIEW
FROM TUNIS

REF: STATE 48114

Classified By: DCM Marc Desjardins for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) This cable is in response to reftel request for information on the viability of creating new regional networks as part of the new US policy on diplomatic engagement with Iraq. Answers below are keyed to reftel questions.

¶2. (C) Tunisia's most significant regional affiliation is with the Arab League. It is also a member of the Arab Maghreb Union, whose Secretary-General is former Tunisian Foreign Minister Habib Ben Yahya. Tunisia is a member of the African Union. In addition, Tunisia participates in several Mediterranean-oriented multilateral groups that deal with trans-national issues. It is a member of the newly launched Union for the Mediterranean (UPM), whose agenda includes joint issues such as water, energy, and immigration.

Tunisia has also participated in the Euro-Mediterranean "Barcelona" Process and the 5 5 group. A member of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Union, Tunisia hosted that group in the summer of 2007. Tunisia is also a member of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, which of course is not regionally based.

¶3. (C) Tunisia views the Arab League as constrained by internal divisions. While Tunisia is firmly in the moderate bloc in that organization, it does not enjoy particular influence. The GOT has expressed frustration over the inertia experienced by the AMU as the result of Moroccan-Algerian tensions, and is a proponent of using that organization more effectively to address regional issues. With respect to the UPM, Tunisia's interest in that organization has waned since the failure of its bid to host the headquarters. In addition, Tunisia came under pressure from Syria and Libya, which rejected the expansion of President Sarkozy's initial concept to include the entire EU, and which denounced the entity as providing cover for diplomatic contacts with Israel.

¶4. (C) It is difficult to predict where the GOT would come down with respect to the possible formulation of ad hoc multilateral task forces. While the Tunisians would likely identify shortcomings in existing structures, these probably have more to do with internal dynamics than strictly capacity. Tunisia periodically calls for a conference to establish an international code of conduct on terrorism, but they have never had traction for this proposal. The GOT did host an international conference on terrorism in 2007 under the auspices of the Islamic International Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization. In addition, Tunisia considers itself a model for the region with respect to women's rights, as well as other economic and social rights. Whether others would accept Tunisia's leadership, however, is another question.

¶4. (C) Because Tunisia is oriented as much toward Europe as it is the Arab world, a "Mediterranean" lens could work well.

US engagement could be tricky, but would obviously be easier to sell if the USG is bringing something tangible to the discussions.

¶5. (C) From our vantage point, job creation, technology transfer, and entrepreneurship-development represent areas that would be of great interest, not only in Tunisia, where the official unemployment rate is 14 percent, but across the Arab world. The operating environment for US programs is very inhospitable in Tunisia. Programs in these areas, however, are better received. A caveat is that the GOT bristles at "assessments" that usually constitute the first phase of technical assistance programs. Sensitivity in the nomenclature we use is important.

¶6. (C) We do not envision sensitivities with respect to participation by the Government of Iraq. Iran's participation could cause some uneasiness, but that could probably be managed if other Arab countries are on board. Tunisia would definitely be sensitive about Israeli participation. Popular sentiment about the Israeli incursion in Gaza is still running high here, and the government and population alike are concerned about statements coming out of the new Israeli government, as well as recent decisions with respect to settlements. The Tunisians will likely insist that any contact with Israel be contingent on tangible progress in the peace process.

¶7. (C) Because Tunisia often hides behind Arab League consensus on difficult issues, the best strategy for bringing Tunisia along would be to have some support lined up among

other Arab states. Otherwise, it would be generally helpful if the initiative for such engagement were seen as not coming from the United States, but from the region. Again, having tangible benefits from US participation would also be important.

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[http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.c fm](http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.cfm)
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